

Smallpox Epidemic in Lehi and the fight against the Vaccination.

By John K. Haws Jr.

In the January 10, 1900 Lehi Banner, it reported that there were seven new cases of smallpox in Lehi. There were no deaths this week. It also reported that new cases appeared also in American Fork.¹

Historically in this country, smallpox has killed more people than most other illnesses. During the Revolutionary War, most deaths did not occur from the ravages of war but from the ravages of smallpox among the soldiers. Thomas Jefferson estimated that of the 30,000 slaves who fought for the revolution, 27,000 of them died of smallpox and camp fever.²

During the early days of America, smallpox continually devastated great amounts of the population. When people would get smallpox, people would isolate them, and there was no one to take care of them and families in a small proximity would all die from the disease.

Some places like Boston had pest houses where the affected individuals would go and live. If you went to such house, it meant sure death for such patients. Paul Revere's infant daughter contracted the disease. He was not going to let them put his daughter into a Pest House. The family took care of her. The whole family was isolated for months and could not leave their house. They put a soldier by the house to insure that no one left. The daughter did not die and no other member of the family contracted the disease. This was disastrous financially for Paul Revere because they shut down his Silver shop and would not allow any orders to be filled.

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¹ Lehi Banner January 10, 1900

² Pox American: The Great Smallpox Epidemic of 1775-82 Elizabeth Anne Fenn.

³ Smallpox and American Politics John K. Haws Jr.

Many times men were selected for political office based on whether they were immune from the disease. John Adams was selected to serve in Congress because he had been inoculated in his youth. This process involved giving smallpox to people in hopes that by contracting it under controlled conditions they'd be more likely to survive without too much permanent damage. John Adams became our president because of this inoculation.⁴

The tragic relocation of the Native Americans to Oklahoma resulted in the death of most of them from smallpox. We now call this movement the "Trail of Tears" and this resulted in bringing smallpox to all of the Native American population.

Lehi was not immune from this deadly disease. The 1900 epidemic soon came to Lehi and deaths were occurring weekly. Lehi was lucky that in 1899, a Dr. by the name of Robert E. Steele had come to open a doctor's office in Lehi. Dr. Steele, a graduate of Chicago's College of Physician Surgeons was the first medical doctor to achieve a sustained period of respectability in Lehi. He purchased property on Main Street from dentist Dr. E.C. Merrihew who had a dental parlor next door west. Dr. Steele's office was at 60 West Main (Tuff's Barbershop) and is still there today.⁵

The October 10, 1899 Lehi Banner reported, "Dr. Steele's elegant new office is nearing completion." The office, while not elegant by today's style was quite stylish by today's standards. The brick work was done by Andrew Fjeld and Charles Ohran, a show of craftsmanship from the turn of the century.

Dr. Steele performed the first appendectomy in Lehi on Joseph Hammer. He was well respected for his medical expertise. As he saw the smallpox epidemic heading to Lehi, he became a proponent for the Smallpox Vaccination which had been invented in 1798 by Jenner, but had not gained the acceptance that it should have. The vaccination had made some major changes at the turn of the century and

⁴ Smallpox and American Politics John K. Haws Jr.

⁵ Guide to Lehi City's Historical Sites and Places Lehi City Preservation Commission

Dr. Steele had seen its success and tried to get Lehi to take advantage of this great defense against this dreaded disease.

The November 23, 1899 Lehi Banner has Dr. Steele saying that “This is a wise precaution and Lehi people should not overlook the matter until it is too late. Dr. Steel reports that he has received a large stock of vaccine virus and is prepare to meet any need.” As hard as he worked to convince the people of Lehi, he could not convince them to take advantage of the vaccination. He especially advocated it for the children of the community.⁶

The State Board of Health intervened and issued an order implemented by the Local Board of Health that all children must be vaccinated or prevented from attending school. Lehi District School Board refused to follow the directive.

In the January 3, 1901 Lehi Banner, the Lehi District School Board printed the letter they were sending to the State refusing to follow this directive. They list four reasons. The first says they believe that they have no legal governing right over the school board. Second says that because of the great opposition to the vaccine, there would be a majority of the children who would not be attending school. Third was that the children would have less chance of contracting the disease in the schools than they would on the streets. Fourth that the number of Quarantine Flags in Lehi have been reduced from nineteen to three and those should be gone by the end of the month. The last paragraph of the rather long letter said..”*In consideration of the facts and conditions herein set fourth, we feel justified in refusing to obey the requirement of your order, and shall admit to our schools all the healthy children of school age who may apply for admission. Your respectfully, W.S. Evans Chairman, S.I. Goodwin, Secretary, J. B. Gaddie, Treasurer. School Board of District No. 12*”⁷

A mass meeting was held in town on the 17th of January 1901 to protest the Board of Health’s Intimidation. The January 17th Lehi Banner told of the meeting

⁶ Lehi Banner November 23, 1899

⁷ Lehi Banner January 3, 1901

that was held in the Meeting House and was filled with important Lehi Citizens. A.M. Davis was elected chairman, with the following committee members: John Woodhouse, E.H. Davis, George Webb, Arthur Bradder, and John E. Ross were elected to gather petitions against the Board of Health. Others helping were Thomas Jones, John Kemp, William Southwick, Louis Garff, and James Allred.⁸

The School Board were threatened with prosecution and the children of Lehi were made to take the vaccination. The biography of Ann Rogers Taylor says that when smallpox raged in Lehi, she took upon herself the responsibility and risk of vaccinating every child in town.⁹

Many more deaths occurred in Lehi from stubbornness. It was later that the disease was eradicated from the earth through wide spread education and vaccination. Dr. Jones' business suffered because of his support for the vaccine and in 1907 he moved to Salt Lake.

How I remember my vaccination at the Lehi Elementary in the early 1960's as all children were required to be vaccinated. It hurt and made a large sore on my arm. I can just imagine having the fever and the sores all over my body. My children did not have to even take the vaccination today.

⁸ Lehi Banner January 17, 1901

⁹ Heart Throbs of the West Volume 12 Page 98-99